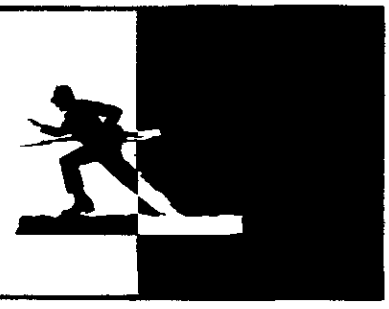
TRAINING NOTES



The JRTC
Platoon and Squad Lessons Learned

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Our unit participated in a rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) in early 1991. From that experience, we learned many useful lessons, primarily during our search and attack operations. We would like to share some of those lessons that apply at squad and platoon level.

First, we need to describe the basic characteristics of the opposing force (OPFOR) at JRTC. Its members work in small sections of six to nine men operating from cache sites and patrol bases in assigned sectors. These sections can operate with stealth and cover ground quickly, and the men are extremely proficient in using MILES (multiple integrated laser engagement system) equipment. They also excel at small unit tactics, including harassment and sniper techniques. (One big advantage they have over the "visitors" is that they do not have to evacuate their casualties. As we found out, casualty evacuation is an important factor in determining the success or failure of any unit going through JRTC.)

During our training, the following scenario was not uncommon for a task force's rifle platoons:

A platoon moves into sector to begin search and attack operations at first light. The platoon enters its objective rally point (ORP) and begins to conduct its reconnaissance. It deploys into squads to conduct a systematic search of the sector. One squad hits a booby trap and loses a key leader while another squad makes contact. The platoon leader attempts to maneuver his reserve squad, while the squad in contact suffers two more casualties. As the OPFOR withdraws, the platoon sergeant consolidates the wounded, while the platoon leader reorganizes the force. As the platoon prepares to evacuate its personnel, sniper fire accounts for three more casualties, all dead. During the course of this action, a platoon of 33 men has lost its combat effectiveness. More important, it has inflicted no significant losses on the OPFOR.

The lessons we learned from experiencing such a scenario dealt with the following areas:

Assessment of the Situation. The first thing any leader must do upon enemy contact is to assess the situation. In our training, we often made chance contact with one of the OPFOR sections. When this happened, our platoons and companies tended to piecemeal their forces,which resulted in team-on-team and squad-on-squad engagements. The leaders did not make accurate assessments, nor did they make decisive moves until it was too late. In their development of the situation, they also failed to take into account the fire support they had available.

Fighting the OPFOR close-in with units of equal sizeproved unsuccessful on almost all occasions. And when a platoon did commit a force to the fight, its battle drills were seldom executed properly. A squad or team sometimes tried to flank the OPFOR, but not as boldly as it should have.

During the after action reviews, OPFOR members remarked that they would see our units initiate their drills. The OPFOR then acted on those drills and took advantage of weak flanking movements. Squad and platoon leaders need to practice making bold flanking movements on concealed routes.

Actions on Contact. In the early stages of the search and attack phase, before the OPFOR infiltrated enough combat power, it tended to break contact. In our units, it was usually the commander's intent to maintain contact

with the enemy, and our units often interpreted this intent as a call for a relentless pursuit of the OPFOR at squad level. In many cases, our squads sustained needless casualties because of overzealous team leaders and soldiers.

A good reaction when the OPFOR breaks contact is not only to maintain momentum but also to maintain security so as not to be baited into an ambush.

Use of Indirect Fire. Some of the keys to success in using indirect fire assets were the dissemination of the fire support plan, proficiency in land navigation, prompt clearance of fires, and the junior leaders' use of fire support.

Platoon leaders and their forward observers (FOs) need to make sure the fire support plan is known down to the lowest level. This is especially important, given the decentralized nature of search and attack operations and the possibility that key leaders will become casualties.

The platoon FO needs to be expert at land navigation so the unit can react quickly to fire missions. Precise navigation is also a critical skill for the company mortars. Friendly casualties from indirect fire often resulted when small units or 60mm mortar crews were not sure of their exact locations.

During our rotation, the reaction time of fire missions was slow because of the delay in clearing fires in the sector. By the time the fires had been cleared, the main action was usually over and the OPFOR had broken contact.

A platoon or squad leader's assessment of the situation is extremely important in the use of indirect fire assets. Our platoons and squads too often found themselves in a close-in fight when they could have pulled back and called in indirect fire.

Another problem we encountered was with our small unit leaders—they had the skill to call for fire but were reluctant to do so when put in command. One solution is to train junior leaders to adjust live rounds at their home station so they can become familiar with this process.

Marksmanship. As our units learned, marksmanship plus fire control are the keys to defeating the OPFOR at team and squad level. Our squads were able to fire and maneuver correctly, but the team leaders did not employ fire control measures or designate targets as well as they should have (understanding, of course, that only blank fire is used and that tracers cannot be used).

Rifle marksmanship, in the form of well aimed shots, was also a problem. Leaders were more concerned with the volume of fire than with its accurate placement. Because MILES marksmanship is so important to success at the JRTC, units need to take every possible opportunity to zero their MILES devices.

Weapons in general are keys to success, and units need to conduct more field fire training, despite ammunition constraints. Most units stress marksmanship only during their semiannual qualification periods; then this emphasis fades when they concentrate on maneuver live fires between qualification periods.

Casualty Evacuation. The most significant lessons we learned at platoon and squad level were probably in the area of casualty evacuation. Units at the JRTC are forced to evacuate their wounded just as they would in wartime and are tied to a piece of ground until the evacuation has been completed. Since units rarely practice caring for wounded soldiers in the middle of a firefight, casualty evacuation becomes a stumbling block at platoon level.

Leaders fail to realize that when a unit sustains casualties and consolidates them at a casualty collection point (CCP) it must also provide the personnel to carry the wounded and their equipment and to provide security. It takes at least six men to evacuate one casualty—four for the casualty and his equipment and two for security. At this rate, two casualties render a squad ineffective, and six make a platoon ineffective.

In our units at the JRTC, leaving only two men to secure a platoon's casualties proved ineffective, because the OPFOR usually detected the casualty collection point (CCP) and harassed it. Units that do not secure their CCPs often sustain even more casualties before the actual evacuation takes place. We found that it took at least three men to secure a squad CCP and at least a squad to secure a platoon CCP.

Our units found poleless litters effective for transporting casualties to the CCP, both in ease of movement and in the survivability of wounded soldiers. We recommend that each platoon have at least three of these poleless litters.

Units such as ours learn many lessons at the JRTC as their standing operating procedures and systems are tested. We have discussed and amplified our own mistakes to highlight some of the more important subjects that are keys to success at the platoon and squad levels.

If you are a platoon or squad leader, you may want to consider these subjects in all of your training. Your unit's performance at the JRTC, or in any realistic training environment, will reflect your personal efforts in these areas.

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Zone Reconnaissance

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One of the biggest problems with scout platoon operations at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) is the failure to use the zone reconnaissance techniques found in ARTEP 7-92-MTP and elsewhere—the *fan, converging routes,* and *successive sector techniques.* Instead, the platoons usually disperse immediately into squad size elements that operate almost independently.

The usual scenario begins with a scout platoon being airlanded by C-130 aircraft, along with the task force quartering party, into an assault landing zone. The platoon has a little over 24 hours to gather its initial information about the zone before the battalion's main body arrives. The platoon's scheme of maneuver in most cases is to send the three squads in three different directions to observe named areas of interest (NAIs) previously identified by the S-2 while the platoon headquarters moves to some central location to set up a command post (CP). Its primary duty is usually to provide a radio link between the squads and the battalion.

The squads move to their NAIs using the modified wedge formation. Unless they have been given specific guidance to the contrary, their actions at the NAI are usually just to look left and right as they continue moving through it. Their reconnaissance, therefore, will be limited to the width of the formation (about two meters) and the distance the soldiers can see to their flanks (about five to 30 meters). This simply is not a zone reconnaissance.

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From the platoon perspective, the end result is that three squads are now in three widely dispersed areas. If one of these areas proves to contain enemy activity that warrants further investigation, the platoon leader cannot reposition his forces to influence the situation. The distance is too great to move a squad quickly enough from one zone to another.

This plan is like putting all your eggs in one basket, which is risky business at this early stage of the intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB). If the S-2's initial IPB is correct, the scouts have a chance of finding something. If it is not correct, the scouts have no realistic ability to regroup and focus their efforts in another direction. And the platoon leader has no command and control over the platoon as a whole, because his squads cannot be responsive to his orders as a unit.

This type of scheme of maneuver also fails to provide for future resupply operations, link-ups, and communication contingencies. Since the squads, for all practical purposes, are operating independently, they must be treated accordingly. Instead of delivering a resupply to one location, from which it can then be distributed, the S-4 must now execute three separate resupplies (four, counting the headquarters element). Resupplying the scouts, who are usually beyond the reach of main supply routes, is difficult enough without compounding the requirements.

If the platoon leader wants to